

Battle over community centre 'homes'

by DAN CARRIER

A FIERCE debate over the future of a popular community centre has blown up after the Town Hall revealed plans to build homes on the site to pay for repairs.

The council argue the Highgate Newtown Community Centre, in Bertram Street, is uneconomical to run and its sports hall is suffering from subsidence.

They are drawing up a scheme to knock down and rebuild the centre with a new housing estate to pay for the work.

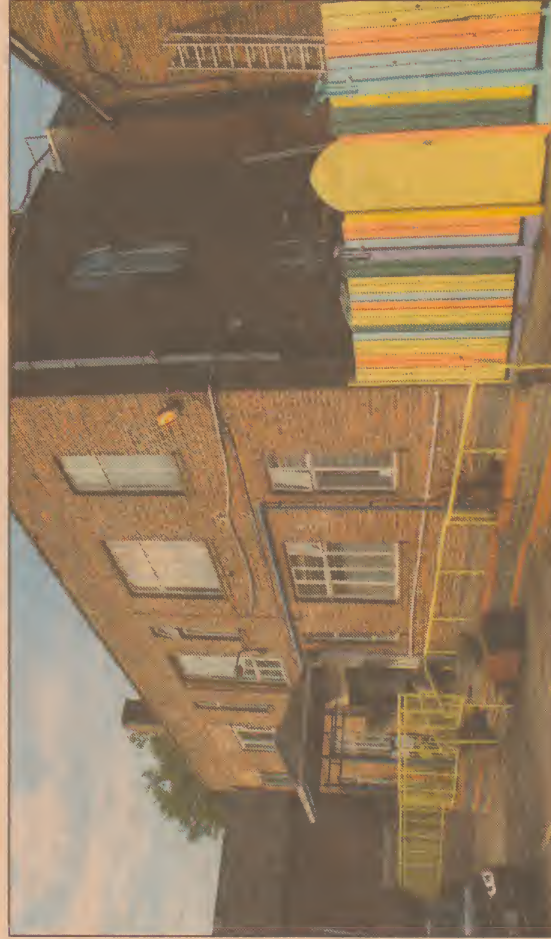
A new group calling itself the Friends of Highgate Newtown Community Centre say the council have yet to disclose the financial argument for knocking down the former Territorial Army barracks, which have been used by a community centre for nearly 40 years.

It added they are concerned that developing the site would compromise the services it provides.

The group want evidence that the centre cannot survive with minimal repairs and say they suspect the plans are an attempt by the Town Hall to cash in on high land values in the area.

Resident Ian Williams, who helped form the group that met for the first time on Tuesday night, said they would be responding to the council.

He added: "There was a sense of disappointment with the information made public. As regards the business case, there is concern that the council is acting as speculator, determined to



Highgate Newtown Community Centre, a former Territorial Army centre



Cllr Valerie Leach: 'Centre has to be self-sustaining in the longer run'



Cllr Maya de Souza: 'Labour criticised sales of buildings for repairs...'

squeeze money out of the development at a cost to the community."

The HNCC trustees' chairman Sean Thompson said they welcomed the work – as long as the plans allowed the centre to continue to provide the same services as now.

He said: "We welcome the council's commitment to modernising the centre. If it means a certain amount of disruption for a little while, it is a price worth paying."

"As for the way the council chooses to pay for it, as long as any development does not adversely affect the work of the centre, it is not in our sphere to comment."

"The main building will be retrofitted and a new hall will provide the same services as the existing hall."

Highgate Green Party councillor Maya De Souza said: "It shouldn't be how to raise as much money as possible to pay for new bathrooms and kitchens in social housing and new school buildings, though we recognise the importance of both of those aims."

"Labour criticised sales of buildings for repairs when in opposition, and this policy is not consistent with their vociferous opposition. Many buildings contracts run by Camden are hugely wasteful and a clear case

has not been made for the amount of Camden would like to spend on new buildings. We'd like to see some good value projects before consideration is even given to selling off land to pay for what may simply be lots of money for building contractors."

Cllr De Souza added the area, which suffers from high levels of deprivation, needed a strong centre, affordable housing, and called for guarantees on the spaces for the community centre, social housing and an architects' competition.

The Greens added they wanted the scheme to be slowed down so the process was inclusive.